

The *SBJT* Forum: The Relevance of the Trinity

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., D. A. Carson, Carl Trueman, Vern Sheridan Poytress, and Greg Strand have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: How does the doctrine of the Trinity relate to Christian preaching?

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.:¹ Preaching is a commission—a charge. As Paul stated boldly, it is the task of the minister of the gospel to “preach the Word . . . in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2). A theology of preaching begins with the humble acknowledgement that preaching is not a human invention but a gracious creation of God and a central part of His revealed will for the church. Furthermore, preaching is distinctively Christian in its origin and practice. Other religions may include teaching, or even public speech and calls to prayer. However, the preaching act is *sui generis*, a function of the church established by Jesus Christ.

The importance of preaching is rooted in Scripture and revealed in the unfolding story of the church. The church has never been faithful when it has lacked fidelity in the pulpit. In the words of P. T. Forsyth, “With preaching Christianity stands or falls, because it is the declaration of the gospel.”

That is why the church cannot *but* preach lest it deny its own identity and abdicate its ordained purpose. Preaching is communication, but not *mere* commu-

nication. It is human speech, but much more than speech. Its ground, its goal, and its glory are all located in the sovereign will of God.

The primary Greek form of the word “preach” (*kērussō*) reveals its intrinsic rootage in the *kerygma*—the gospel itself. Preaching is an inescapably theological act, for the preacher dares to speak of God and, in a very real sense, *for* God. A theology of preaching should take Trinitarian form, reflecting the very nature of the self-revealing God. In so doing, it bears witness to the God who speaks, the Son who saves, and the Spirit who illuminates.

The God Who Speaks

True preaching begins with this confession: we preach because God has spoken. That fundamental conviction is the fulcrum of the Christian faith and of Christian preaching. The Creator God of the universe, the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Lord, chose of his own sovereign will to reveal Himself to us. Supreme and complete in his holiness, needing nothing and hidden from our view, God condescended to speak to us—even to reveal Himself to us.

As Carl F. H. Henry suggests, revela-

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tion is “a divinely initiated activity, God’s free communication by which he alone turns His personal privacy into a deliberate disclosure of his reality.” In an act of holy graciousness, God gave up His comprehensive privacy that we might know Him. God’s revelation is the radical claim upon which we dare to speak of God—*He has spoken!*

Our God-talk must therefore begin and end with what God has spoken concerning Himself. Preaching is not the business of speculating about God’s nature, will, or ways, but is bearing witness to what God has spoken concerning Himself. Preaching does not consist of speculation but of exposition.

The preacher dares to speak the Word of truth to a generation which rejects the very notion of objective, public truth. This is not rooted in the preacher’s arrogant claim to have discovered worldly wisdom or to have penetrated the secrets of the universe. To the contrary, the preacher dares to proclaim truth on the basis of God’s sovereign self-disclosure. God has spoken, and He has commanded us to speak of Him.

The Bible bears witness to itself as the written Word of God. This springs from the fact that God has spoken. In the Old Testament alone, the phrases “the Lord said,” “the Lord spoke,” and “the word of the Lord came” appear hundreds of times. This confession brings the preacher face to face with Scripture as divine revelation. The authority of Scripture is none other than the authority of God Himself. As the Reformation formula testifies, “where Scripture speaks, God speaks.” The authority of the preacher is intrinsically rooted in the authority of the Bible as the church’s Book and the unblemished Word of God. Its total truthfulness is a

witness to God’s own holiness. We speak because God has spoken, and because he has given us His Word.

As Scripture itself records, God has called the church to speak of Him on the basis of his Word and deeds. All Christian preaching is biblical preaching. That formula is axiomatic. Those who preach from some other authority or text may speak with great effect and attractiveness, but they are preaching “another gospel,” and their words will betray them. Christian preaching is not an easy task. Those who are called to preach bear a heavy duty. As Martin Luther confessed, “If I could come down with a good conscience, I would rather be stretched out on a wheel and carry stones than preach one sermon.” Speaking on the basis of what God has spoken is both arduous and glorious.

A theology of preaching begins with the confession that the God who speaks has ultimate claim upon us. He who spoke a word and brought a world into being created us from the dust. God has chosen enlivened dust—and all creation—to bear testimony to his glory.

In preaching, finite, frail, and fault-ridden human beings bear bold witness to the infinite, all-powerful, and perfect Lord. Such an endeavor would smack of unmitigated arrogance and over-reaching were it not for the fact that God Himself has set us to the task. In this light, preaching is not an act of arrogance, but of humility. True preaching is not an exhibition of the brilliance or intellect of the preacher, but an exposition of the wisdom and power of God.

This is possible only when the preacher stands in submission to the text of Scripture. The issue of authority is inescapable. Either the preacher *or* the text will be the operant authority. A theology of preach-

ing serves to remind those who preach of the danger of confusing our own authority with that of the biblical text. We are called, not only to *preach*, but to preach *the Word*.

Acknowledging the God who speaks as Lord is to surrender the preaching event in an act of glad submission. Preaching thus becomes the occasion for the Word of the Lord to break forth anew. This occasion itself represents the divine initiative, for it is God Himself, and not the preacher, who controls His Word.

John Calvin understood this truth when he affirmed that “the Word goeth out of the mouth of God in such a manner that it likewise goeth out of the mouth of men; for God does not speak openly from heaven, but employs men as His instruments.” Calvin understood preaching to be the process by which God uses human instruments to speak what He Himself has spoken. This He accomplishes through the preaching of Scripture under the illumination and *testimonium* of the Holy Spirit. God uses preachers, Calvin offered, “rather than to thunder at us and drive us away.” Further, “it is singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to Himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that His voice may resound in them.”

Thus, preaching springs from the truth that God has spoken in word and deed and that He has chosen human vessels to bear witness to Himself and his gospel. We speak because we cannot be silent. We speak because God has spoken.

The Son Who Saves

“In the past,” wrote the author of Hebrews, “God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days He

has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe” (Heb 1:1-2). The God who reveals Himself (*Deus Revelatus*) has spoken supremely and definitively through His Son.

Carl F. H. Henry once stated that only a theology based in a vision of “divine invasion” could lay claim upon the church. The same holds true for a theology of preaching. All Christian preaching is unabashedly Christological.

Christian preaching points to the incarnation of God in Christ as the stackpole of truth and the core of Christian confession. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Cor 5:19). Thus, preaching is itself an act of grace, making clear God’s initiative toward us in Christ. Preaching is one means by which the redeemed bear witness to the Son who saves. That message of divine salvation, the unmerited act of God in Christ, is the criterion by which all preaching is to be judged.

With this in mind, all preaching is understood to be rooted in the incarnation. As the apostle John declared, God spoke to us by means of His Son, *the Word*, and that Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (1:14). All human speech is rendered mute by the incarnate Word of God. Yet, at the same time, the incarnation allows us to speak of God in the terms He has set for Himself—in the identity of Jesus the Christ.

Preaching is itself incarnational. In the preaching event a human being stands before a congregation of fellow humans to speak the most audacious words ever encountered or uttered by the human species: God has made Himself known in His Son, through whom He has also made provision for salvation.

As Karl Barth insisted, all preaching must have a *thrust*. The thrust cannot come from the energy, earnestness, or even the conviction of the preacher. “The sermon,” asserted Barth, “takes its thrust when it begins: The Word became flesh... once and for all, and when account of this is taken in every thought.” The power of the sermon does not lie in the domain of the preacher, but in the providence of God. Preaching does not demonstrate the power of the human instrument, but of the biblical message of God’s words and deeds. Barth’s theology falls short of biblical orthodoxy, but on this point, he understands the character of true preaching.

Jesus serves as our model, as well as the content of our preaching. As Mark recorded in his gospel, “Jesus came preaching” (1:4), and His model of preaching as the unflinching forth-telling of God’s gracious salvation is the ultimate standard by which all human preaching is to be judged. Jesus Himself sent His disciples out to preach repentance (Mark 6:12). The church received its charge to “preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 15:15). Preaching is, as Christ made clear, an extension of his own will and work. The church preaches because it has been commanded to do so.

If preaching takes its ground and derives its power from God’s revelation in the Son, then the cross looms as the paramount symbol and event of Christian proclamation. “We preach not ourselves,” pressed Paul, “but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5). That message was centered on the cross as the definitive criterion of preaching. Paul understood that the cross is simultaneously the most divisive and the most unifying event in human history. The preaching of the cross—the procla-

mation of the substitutionary atonement wrought by the sinless Son of God—is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

Any honest and faithful theology of preaching must acknowledge that charges of foolishness are not incidental to the homiletical task. They are central. Those seeking worldly wisdom or secret signs will be frustrated with what we preach, for the cross is the abolition of both. The Christian preacher dares not speak a message which will appeal to the sign-seeker and wisdom-lovers, “lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor 1:17). As James Denney stated plainly, “No man can give at once the impression that he himself is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save.”

Beyond this, Paul indicated the danger of ideological temptations and the allure of “technique” as threats to the preaching of the gospel. Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul explained, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Cor 2:4-5).

To preach the gospel of the Son who saves is to forfeit all claim or aim to make communication technique or human persuasion the measure of homiletical effectiveness. Preaching is effective when it is faithful. The effect is in the hands of God.

The preacher dares to speak for God, on the basis of what God has spoken concerning Himself and His ways, and that means speaking the word of the cross. That underscores the humility of preaching. As John Piper suggests, the act of preaching is “both a past event of substi-

tution and a present event of execution.” Only the redeemed, those who know the cross as the power and wisdom of God, understand the glory and the burden of preaching. To the world of unbelief, such words are senseless prattle.

To preach the message of the Son who saves is to spread the world’s most hopeful message. All Christian preaching is resurrection preaching. A theology of preaching includes both a “theology of the cross” and a “theology of glory.” The glory is not the possession of the church, much less the preacher, but of God Himself.

The cross brings the eclipse of all human pretensions and enlightenment, but the empty tomb reveals the radiant sunrise of God’s personal glory. If Christ has not been raised, asserted Paul, “our preaching is useless” (1 Cor 15:14). This glimpse of God’s glory does not afford the church or the preacher a sense of triumphalism or self-sufficiency. To the contrary, it points to the sufficiency of God and to the glory only he enjoys—a glory He has shared with us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The reflection of that revelation is the radiance and glory of preaching.

The Spirit Who Illuminates

The preacher stands before the congregation as the external minister of the Word, but the Holy Spirit works as the internal minister of that same Word. A theology of preaching must take the role of the Spirit into full view, for without an understanding of the work of the Spirit, the task of preaching is robbed of its balance and power.

The neglect of the work of the Spirit is a symptom of the decline of biblical Trinitarianism in our midst. Charles H. Spurgeon warned, “You might as well expect

to raise the dead by whispering in their ears, as hope to save souls by preaching to them, if it were not for the agency of the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit performs His work of inspiration, indwelling, regeneration, and sanctification as the inner minister of the Word; it is the Spirit’s ministry of illumination that allows the Word of the Lord to break forth.

Both the preacher and the hearers are dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit for any adequate understanding of the text. As Calvin warned, “No one should hesitate to confess that he is able to understand God’s mysteries only in so far as he is illumined by God’s grace. He who attributes any more understanding to himself is all the more blind because he does not recognize his own blindness.” This has been the confession of great preachers from the first century to the present, and the absence of a conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit is a sign that the preacher does not understand his task and calling. Tertullian, for example, called the Spirit his “Vicar” who ministered the Word to himself and to his congregation.

The Reformation saw a new acknowledgement of the union of Word and Spirit. This *testimonium* was understood to be the crucial means by which the Spirit imparts understanding. This Trinitarian doctrine produced preaching that was both bold and humble; bold in its content, but uttered forth by humble humans who knew their utter dependence upon God.

John Calvin described the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit as absolutely necessary in order for the individual to receive the Word: “For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in His Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the

inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.”

Martin Luther had affirmed this same truth in various ways, most famously in his exhortation to his young students that they must preach the Word faithfully in order to get the Word to the ears of the congregation. Nevertheless, Luther also insisted that only the Holy Spirit could take the Word from the ear into the human heart.

Luther had another important point to make as well. Even as the preacher is dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the Word, Luther insisted that the Father had willed that the Spirit should work uniquely through the Word, and not independent of it. He rejected the notion that the Holy Spirit would impart spiritual life through sacraments or other actions apart from the Word.

In Luther’s own words, “Therefore no one desiring comfort should wait until the Holy Spirit presents Christ to him personally or speaks to him directly from heaven. He gives His testimony publicly, in the sermon. There you must seek Him and wait for Him until He touches your heart through the Word that you hear with your ears, and thus He also testifies of Christ inwardly through His working.” This quality of confidence in the Holy Spirit’s work through the Word, and only through the Word, would be a much-needed corrective in today’s confused church.

The same God who called forth human vessels and set them to preach also promised the power of the Spirit. Martyn Lloyd-

Jones was aware that preachers often forget this promise: “Seek Him always. But go beyond seeking Him; expect Him. Do you expect anything to happen when you get up to preach in a pulpit? Or do you just say to yourself, ‘Well, I have prepared my address, I am going to give them this address; some of them will appreciate it and some will not’? Are you expecting it to be the turning point in someone’s life? That is what preaching is meant to do. . . . Seek this power, expect this power, yearn for this power; and when the power comes, yield to Him.”

To preach “in the Spirit” is to preach with the acknowledgement that the human instrument has no control over the message—and no control over the Word as it is set loose within the congregation. The Spirit, as John declared, testifies, “because the Spirit is the truth” (1 John 5:6).

J. I. Packer defined preaching as “the event of God bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction from Himself through the words of a spokesperson.” That rather comprehensive definition depicts the process of God speaking forth His Word, using human instruments to proclaim His message, and then calling men and women unto Himself. A theological analysis reveals that preaching is deadly business. As Spurgeon confirmed, “Life, death, hell, and worlds unknown may hang on the preaching and hearing of a sermon.”

The apostle Paul revealed the logic of preaching when he asked, “How then, can they call upon the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom 10:14). The

preacher is a commissioned agent whose task is to speak because God has spoken, because the preacher has been entrusted with the telling of the gospel of the Son who saves, and because God has promised the power of the Spirit as the seal and efficacy of the preacher's calling.

The ground of the preaching is none other than the revelation that God has addressed to us in Scripture. The goal of preaching is no more and no less than faithfulness to this calling. The glory of preaching is that God has promised to use preachers and preaching to accomplish His purpose and bring glory unto Himself.

Therefore, a theology of preaching is essentially doxology. The ultimate purpose of the sermon is to glorify God and to reveal a glimpse of His glory to his creation. This is the sum and substance of the preaching task. That God would choose such a means to express His own glory is beyond our understanding; it is rooted in the mystery of the will and wisdom of God.

Yet our God has called out preachers and commanded them to preach. Preaching is not an act the church is called to defend, but a ministry preachers are called to perform. And as we are well reminded, we are not called to accomplish this task alone. The Holy Spirit is the seal and promise of our preaching. Thus, whatever the season, the imperative stands: Preach the Word!

ENDNOTE

¹This response is excerpted from a three-part commentary entitled, "Why Do We Preach? A Foundation for Christian Preaching" that originally appeared Dec 15-17, 2005, on www.AlbertMohler.com. Used with permission.

SBJT: What elements of the doctrine of the Trinity are largely overlooked in substantial swaths of today's evangelicalism? And what are the practical implications of such neglect?

D. A. Carson: The question is a bit cheeky, of course, since it assumes that much is wrong. All of us know fine evangelical churches that are carefully trying to teach the whole counsel of God. While majoring on biblical exposition, they are also enthusiastic about teaching sufficient historical and systematic theology to give their members a sense of the historical continuity and of the doctrinal heritage of the people of God. Nevertheless, it is doubtless fair to assert that in many churches the doctrine of the Trinity is merely asserted, or in some cases merely assumed, but never or at best rarely taught. When was the last time you heard a good sermon on the subject, complete with careful demonstration of its pastoral and spiritual relevance?

A responsible answer to the question could easily be expanded into a book. I shall restrict myself to five observations, briefly put:

(1) There are few attempts to show how the texts of the Bible came to generate what came to be called, in the patristic period, the doctrine of the Trinity. It makes little difference, of course, that the *word* "Trinity" is not found in the Scriptures, provided the concept is. Nevertheless, distinctions regarding three "persons" and one "substance" were fought-over attempts, during the patristic period, to try to handle *all* the biblical evidence, instead of just part of it.

Such attempts, of course, constitute a subset of the broader responsibility to move carefully from Scripture itself to systematic articulations of truth—i.e.,

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articulations that are in fact summaries of more than any one passage, articulations often cast in the terminology of contemporary culture. Showing believers how this is done, and giving historical examples of how it has been done well, and how it has been done badly, becomes an exercise in teaching them basic interpretive skills—not to mention the sense of solidarity it engenders with believers in other centuries who, no less than we, had to wrestle with how to understand the Bible faithfully, and not least how to respond to assorted pernicious reductionisms.

(2) Careful instruction about the Trinity will draw believers to greater contemplation and adoration of *who God is*. When the tone of the instruction is deeply edifying, congregations usually lap up careful, thoughtful, biblically-demonstrated truth—not least truth about God, our blessed Maker and Redeemer. The alternative is to be so sloppy about how we think of God that the sloppiness spills over into our everyday speech, and even into our praying: e.g., “Heavenly Father, we just want to thank you for dying on the cross for us.” The Father did *not* die on the cross, of course: to say he did is to fall into the ancient heresy called *patripas-sionism*. Must we not carefully observe the *distinctive* works of the members of the Godhead, as well as all that binds them? The result of careful preaching and teaching on the Trinity is that in our thinking and praying, we will be contemplating God *as he has disclosed himself to us*, rather than pretending that zeal and clichés are an adequate defense against sloppiness and even heresy.

Sometimes introductory knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity issues in distinctions that are *too tightly* drawn. Some argue, for instance, that all Chris-

tian prayer should address the Father in the name of the Son by the power of the Spirit. Certainly that is *one* way the New Testament writers depict prayer, but it is far from the only one. Both the Father and the Son are explicitly addressed in prayer in the Scriptures. While prayer to the Spirit is not explicitly exemplified, the deity of the Spirit is affirmed, as also is his function as our Advocate (cf. John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1)—and that function itself authorizes prayer, for he, like the Son, simultaneously represents us and pleads our case. See especially the elegant essay by Edmund P. Clowney, “A Biblical Theology of Prayer,” in *Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Exeter: Paternoster, 1990), 136-73.

(3) In particular, the church must constantly go over the biblical materials that ground belief in Jesus as both God and man, not only so as to preserve sound doctrine, but so as to integrate these realities with all that Jesus accomplished, and with all that he continues to be: he will forever be both God and a human being, our elder brother. There are huge implications not only for understanding what he achieved on the cross, and not only for his high priestly ministry (read Hebrews!), but also for what we become when we finally share in his resurrection. Moreover, there are approaches to such issues that go beyond a handful of proof-texts (e.g., John 1:1; 20:28; Rom 9:5), even if those texts are important. The crucial “Son” passage, John 5:16-30, for instance, needs to be carefully thought through—a helpful way, incidentally, of clearing up at least some of the deep misapprehensions that Muslims have when we Christians confess that Jesus is the Son of God.

(4) Perhaps nowhere is the doctrine of

the Trinity more important than in our meditation upon the love of God. One may usefully compare what the Bible says in this regard with what the Qur'an says about Allah. Islam stresses God's transcendence, his utter independence of his creatures, and strongly insists he is merciful toward them, but it barely mentions his love. (A good place to start finding out more about the Qur'an, in conjunction with actually reading it, is Mateen Ellass, *Understanding the Koran: A Quick Christian Guide to the Muslim Holy Book* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004].) Christianity stresses the same characteristics, of course—God's transcendence, his independence (his "aseity," the Puritans would have said), his mercy—but adds that God is loving. Indeed, the Bible goes so far as to say that God *is* love, a clause you cannot find in the Qur'an. In the Old Testament, where the picture of God being a complex unity is still blurred, God's love is displayed in his care for his world, in the way he entreats sinners, in his love for his chosen covenant people. (I have described the different ways the Bible speaks of the love of God in *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2000].) Sooner or later, however, one cannot help but wonder in what precise sense it is proper to talk about God's love in eternity past. There is some deep sense in which God loves himself, of course (it is worth reading John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* [Portland: Multnomah, 1991]), yet since all we know of love is its "other"-orientation, then when God was the only being that existed, what precisely would it mean to confess that even "then" (if we may use a time category for eternity past), "God is love"? Here the New Testament Scriptures provide more food for thought. Twice we

are told that the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20); similarly, we are told that the Son loves the Father (John 14:31). Nor are we to think that this love is restricted to the days of the Son's incarnation. The love of the Father for the Son stretches back before the creation of the world (John 17:24). In short, precisely because the one God of the Bible is a complex unity, a Trinity, space is created to appreciate more fully how even with respect to eternity past, it is entirely coherent to confess, "God is love," and maintain something of the "other"-orientation to the nature of love. Indeed, the love among the persons of the Godhead becomes the supreme model of the love that Christians are to display for other believers—a love which substantially constitutes their unity (John 17:20-26).

(5) Revelation itself is tied to the doctrine of the Trinity. Although God has spoken words, his final "Word" is the incarnated Son, who perfectly reflects him and displays the effulgence of his glory (John 1:1-18; Heb 1:1-4). Perhaps nowhere in the Bible is the revelation provided by the Son as tightly tied to the Son's relation to the Father as in John 5:16-30, to which I have already referred—but of course there are many passages where that relation is presupposed (e.g., Col 1:15-20). Throughout his ministry, the Son is aided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit himself comes as the *Paraclete* who succeeds the Son and replaces him this side of the resurrection and ascension, until the Son returns. Among his tasks is the manner in which he directs people to the Son, and thus to God's revelation in the Son. All of the persons of the Godhead are united in a complex, integrated, role-specific commitment to the self-disclosure of God in what we call "revelation"—all

designed to bring himself glory and to benefit his people. A very long essay would not begin to survey the wealth of biblical texts and themes that intertwine on this subject.

SBJT: Can you discuss the practical importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for the church today?

Carl Trueman: The doctrine of the Trinity is probably one of the most important and, at the same time, one of the most neglected essential points of Christian teaching in evangelicalism. One of the reasons for this is the fact that evangelicalism, like Protestantism in general, has historically tended to define itself over against Roman Catholicism; and the Trinity was not a substantial point of disagreement between the two traditions. Attitudes toward justification, authority, and the sacraments have thus been more central to the identity of evangelicalism.

A further problem is probably the speculative appearance of much Trinitarian theology. The language used to articulate classic Trinitarian theology—person, essence, substance, hypostasis—would seem at first glance to be both abstruse and unbiblical, not simply in the obvious sense that it is not found in the Bible, but in the deeper sense that it carries with it connotations of Greek metaphysics and a world which seems far removed from the dynamic of the biblical history of redemption.

Nonetheless, even a cursory examination of the history of the doctrine indicates that the Trinity is both a key Christian doctrine and, for all of its complexity, one which is crucial to even the least theologically literate believer. In the early centuries after Christ, one of the basic questions which preoccupied the church was that of

the identity of Jesus Christ, and this was no ivory tower discussion. At the heart of the matter lay two very practical concerns: what exactly did Christians mean when they cried out in praise, “Jesus is Lord!”? And what was the significance of the linking of the Son and the Spirit to the Father in the baptismal formula? These two basic concerns provided the essential dynamic for Christological and, ultimately, Trinitarian thinking in the first four centuries. Thus, the doctrine is, in origin, intimately connected to the most basic practical acts of Christian worship, acts in which all believers are involved.

Given this, the complex conceptual vocabulary which the church developed to express the doctrine can be seen not so much as abstract metaphysics but as an attempt to articulate the ontological foundations for the economy of salvation. Put less pretentiously, Trinitarian language expresses that which must be true in terms of God’s eternal nature in order for the biblical account of the history of salvation to make sense, and for the worship that results to make sense. Of course, given the infinite nature of God and the finite nature of his revelation, it is ultimately impossible for finite language to do full justice to God as he is in himself. Thus, to the finite mind, the idea of God as one and God as three seems a straightforward absurdity; yet that is what scripture plainly teaches. The metaphysical language used to express this should therefore be seen as an attempt to unpack this teaching and should be understood in negative terms: to say Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one substance is not so much to make a positive assertion as to deny that any one person of the Trinity has an ontological priority and superiority to the others; to say that they are

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three persons is to deny that the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are merely synonyms.

So what is the immediate importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for believers today? I would suggest at least a twofold importance. First, we need to be very clear that what is at stake in the doctrine of the Trinity is the very identity of God. Christians do not worship a God who is merely an example of deity in general. He is the very specific, particular God who is both three and one. This is especially significant in the context of the modern pluralist societies in which we live. For example, many Christians might find themselves faced with the question of whether the God of the Koran is the God of the Bible. After all, they seem to have some things in common (both are sovereign creators, for example). A clear grasp of the doctrine of the Trinity precludes a positive answer to this question: if Allah is not the one who is three and the three who are one, then he is not true God in any real sense. Thus, at a basic level, a grasp of this doctrine reminds us that the God of the Bible is utterly unique and different than other religious conceptions of god, even other monotheistic viewpoints.

Second, the doctrine should shape the way in which we worship. If God is a very particular God, and in Christ has set forth a very particular way of salvation, then our response of worship should, in turn, be very particular and take full account of God as Trinity. Perhaps the most significant and helpful essay on this is John Owen's book, *On Communion with God*, where he delineates the Trinitarian nature of God, the Trinitarian action of God in salvation, and the way in which our worship, directed to the God who is one, must also be directed to the God

who is three. Owen perhaps takes this to extremes, arguing that the Lord's Prayer itself is not to be used by Christians since it originates from a time before the Trinity had been fully revealed (a point which he signally does not make with reference to the Psalms). But, in the context of modern evangelical worship, it is worth asking how a creedal commitment to the Trinity actually affects our thinking about God and our worship. For Owen, all prayer is addressed to God the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit; and, additionally, the different persons are to be specifically worshipped for their respective actions in salvation. As salvation is the act of the whole Godhead, so in its particulars it can be specifically ascribed to Father (e.g., appointing Son as Mediator), to the Son (e.g., taking up and executing the office of Mediator) and the Spirit (e.g., applying salvation to the individual). Each task can only be performed by one who is God; and within such a framework, one of the practical aspects of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is made very clear.

SBJT: Why Must Our Hermeneutics Be Trinitarian?

Vern Sheridan Poythress: Our hermeneutics must be Trinitarian because God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Consummator, is Trinitarian. When we interpret either the words of God or the works of God, we need to take into account who he is. Everything we know about him, including his Trinitarian character, potentially influences our understanding of his words and his works. Moreover, when people introduce erroneous conceptions of God, whether deistic, pantheistic, unitarian, or modalistic, those errors will inevitably affect interpretation of

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the meaning of God's words and works, because meaning is influenced by one's conception of authorship. The effects may often be subtle, but may sometimes also be dramatic.

Rationality

One of the more obvious effects arises through differences in people's ideas of rationality. Typically people who reject the Trinity do so on account of its alleged irrationality, and substitute for it a rationalistic conception of God, tailored to the expectations of fallen man. Man's fallen reason becomes the measure of what God can or cannot be. And then, of course, one can expect human reason to lord it over the interpretation of the words and works of God as well.

By contrast, in Trinitarian theology we confess both the incomprehensibility of God, due to his infinity, and his knowability due to his revelation of himself both in Scripture and in the world (Rom 1:18-23). This signals both the accessibility of truth and the incomprehensibility of the totality of truth, and prepares the way for approaching interpretation in a rational, but not rationalistic, way.

Redemption

The significance of Trinity is particularly notable in redemption. God the Father sovereignly controls the events of history and the events in individual lives that lead to individual and corporate salvation. God the Son accomplishes salvation, reconciliation, and cleansing from sin in the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection. God the Spirit applies the redemption to individuals and groups through his coming to indwell us. Of course all three Persons are involved in all three of these areas; but each Person

has his own role.

These redemptive acts each have implications for hermeneutics. The control of the Father over history includes his control over the words that he gives to man, either by direct divine voice as at Mount Sinai, or through human prophets like Moses and Isaiah. God's control needs to be kept in mind in our reception of the Bible, because otherwise we may come to treat the Bible in practice as a merely human product, or a product where God is "doing the best he can" with partially uncooperative human beings. Genuine human agency in writing Scripture does not imply independence from God or reduction of the control of God, any more than the genuine agency of the Son implies his independence from the Father.

Second, consider the role of the Son. Because of human sin, we are separated from God and would die if we stood in his presence (remember Exod 33:20). But receiving the word of God involves receiving his presence. We would die reading Scripture except for the mediation of the Son. Through the Son we receive knowledge of God without dying.

Third, consider the role of the Spirit. The Spirit "will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). The promise in John 16 focuses on the special role of the Spirit after Pentecost, and perhaps also applies in a special way to the apostles. But the principle concerning the Spirit's guidance generalizes to cover the whole work of the Spirit in illumination. Only the person whose heart is molded by the Spirit and attuned to the Spirit can understand the things of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:6-16). Spirituality is necessary for understanding the teaching of the Bible, as saints throughout the ages have known. And this spirituality is not just some vague sensitivity

to religious phenomena, but a spiritual knowledge of divine things such as only the Holy Spirit can give. Modern scholars under the pressure of rationalism are prone to forget this role of the Spirit.

Other Implications

Space is too short to do more than touch on two other areas in hermeneutics. First, the roles of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in Trinitarian redemption suggest analogous roles in God's verbal communication. God the Father is not only in control of history, but in control of his word that goes forth from his mouth. He is the author of Scripture. God the Son, as the Word of God (John 1:1), can be closely associated with the content spoken by the Father, which then leads to the meaning-content of the biblical text. And God the Spirit stands with the human reader in interpreting the textual message ("whatever he *hears* he will speak," John 16:13).

Accordingly, the Father can be associated with the role of the author, the Son with the role of the text or discourse, and the Spirit with the role of the reader. That does not make human readers infallible, but for those in union with Christ the Spirit comes as an infallible divine reader who guides the human reader.

The pattern of author, discourse, and reader can be generalized even beyond the bounds of Scripture. While we affirm that Scripture, and not other writings, is the infallible word of God, we can also see that the Trinitarian being of God, as Father, Son, and Spirit, is the ultimate archetype behind *all* human communication as authors send discourses to readers. The unity and diversity within the Trinity are the archetype for understanding the ectypal unity-in-diversity in author, discourse, and reader. Accordingly, we are

encouraged to avoid both the unitarian error, which would collapse all complexity in human communication into a single block of meaning, with no remaining differentiation; and to avoid the polytheistic error of multiplying meanings chaotically, such as what takes place when human readers are seen as lords (gods!) of meaning.

Second, human language originates as a gift of God in creation, rather than being the product merely of a gradual naturalistic ascent of man from the slime. In fact, the description of the Second Person of the Trinity as the Word (John 1:1), as well as the conversation between the Father and the Son in a passage like John 17, indicates that human language is what it is against the background of *divine* language in the mystery of intra-Trinitarian communication. Reductionistic approaches to language must accordingly be critically evaluated. And we are invited to see that the obvious meanings that even a casual reader of Scripture can perceive open the door to the infinity of the mind of God, and the infinity of meaning in intra-Trinitarian communication. The category of mystery accordingly belongs to meaning and to hermeneutical reflections on meaning.

SBJT: Why must our evangelism be Trinitarian?

Greg Strand: This is a very important question to ask. I believe one of our root problems is that our understanding of and engagement in evangelism is flawed: it is not Trinitarian. This results in a truncated understanding of the gospel, which does not lead to new birth but rather ends in stillbirth. God can certainly bring about new birth even with an incomplete understanding of the gospel, but He also uses

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means, human vessels, to communicate that gospel, so it is important that we get this right. I believe this Trinitarian flaw is adversely affecting the church of Jesus Christ today.

It is most instructive and helpful to see why our evangelism must be Trinitarian by focusing on each person of the Godhead, and the role they play in our salvation. Through this we will also see some of the specific weaknesses of much of our evangelism today and why our evangelism must be Trinitarian.

God the Father

Our primary problem is not our sin, but rather what our sins incur or deserve—the wrath of God. Certainly we are sinners (Rom 3:23), and we need to be saved from our sin. But first and foremost our salvation is from God’s wrath (Rom 1:17; Eph 2:1-3).

Now consider our evangelism in light of this critically important truth. Most of the time only our sin is mentioned and not what our sin (and sins) deserves. This often means that salvation primarily has a horizontal component: being saved from the evils that surround me or affect me or even in which I engage, at the expense of a vertical component, namely, from God’s wrath. This is one reason the therapeutic movement is so large, and why huge sections in many Christian bookstores are directed to “self-help” or “how to” issues. Moreover, if anything about God the Father is mentioned, it is only His love. Certainly that God is love is true and must be said (1 John 4:8). But it is not all that must be said, because a partial truth about God treated as the whole truth about God is a lie.

If we are going to get this right in evangelism, both God’s holiness and His

love must be emphasized. If we downplay or ignore His holiness, we end up with a god other than the God who has revealed Himself in the Scripture. If we only focus on God’s love, we also end up with a god far less than God, and we cheapen that great love that was supremely manifested in how He addressed His wrath (Rom 3:21-26; 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10). All of this is wonderfully summarized in “but God” (Eph. 2:4).

God the Son

Because we are by nature children of God’s wrath, the only way God can be just and holy is to punish sin by punishing sinners. And if we who are under God’s wrath pay for our sins by our very lives, there is no life (John 3:36). And it must be said that if God were to do this He would be entirely just and right (Rom 9:14-18). “But God,” because of His love and holiness, sent His son, Jesus Christ. Jesus was our representative and our substitute. He is the mediator between us and God, who gave Himself as the ransom for sinners (1 Tim 2:5). Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus’ death was the propitiation for our sins so that God’s wrath was appeased or turned away (1 John 2:2; 4:10). This death of Christ on our behalf was rooted in God’s love (1 John 4:10) and in His mercy, grace, and kindness (Eph 4:4-7). God the Father and God the Son are not in competition against one another, but rather in concord with one another. The preeminent display of God’s love and holiness is the cross. Our salvation is won through the death and resurrection of Christ alone.

How does our evangelism square with this? Often we inadvertently succumb to a form of modalism by focusing on Jesus

alone apart from the Father and Spirit. We address sin and the need to be saved from sin, and since Jesus is a friend of sinners, people are encouraged to receive Him. There is little or no mention at all of the Father who sent Jesus, His Son, to be the Savior of the world, or that Christ alone is the one who serves as the propitiation for our sins on which basis we deserve the Father's wrath. The sole focus is Jesus. But even though this is right and necessary, it is insufficient. Another error in our evangelism is that we wrongly make our faith in Christ the objective basis of our salvation, not Christ Himself. This fits with our subjective, emotional day where experience trumps truth. But we are saved on account of Christ alone. He is the objective basis of our salvation, and faith is the instrumental means by which this objective reality becomes real in a person's life. God the Son saves us from the wrath of God the Father, not my faith. We must not add to or subtract from Jesus' important words: "it is finished" (John 19:30), and "peace be with you" (John 20:19). This completed work of Christ is now applied in our lives by another (John 14:16-17), the Holy Spirit, who will manifest Christ in all His fullness which will glorify the Father (John 16:14; 2 Cor 4:6)

God the Holy Spirit

In God the Father sending God the Son, our salvation was achieved and accomplished. But it is through God the Holy Spirit that that salvation is applied or realized in individual lives. God the Holy Spirit convicts of sin (John 16:8) and regenerates (Titus 3:5), which is synonymous with being born again or born from above (John 3:3, 5). The Holy Spirit enables one to see, understand, and know Christ (John 14:26; 16:14; 1 Cor 2:12), and to confess Him

as Lord (1 Cor 12:3). Apart from the Holy Spirit, Christ's work is not applied. But if one has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, Christ's work has been applied in that person's life, and He is magnified as the Savior. Through this means God is glorified (1 Cor 6:18-20; 2 Cor 1:20-22; 3:18; 4:6). The Christian life from beginning to end is dependent on the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9; Gal 3:2-3).

Although we have seen a renewed emphasis in the ministry of the Holy Spirit (which has been right and healthy), His ministry has been overlooked in the important area of evangelism, new birth, and living the Christian life. By underemphasizing our enslavement to sin, by overlooking our heart problem, we merely ask people to make a mental decision for Christ and against their sin. This undermines the purpose of Christ and His death and resurrection, namely, addressing God's wrath against our sin, and it denies the reality of and the necessity for the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We then end up with a moral religion, something one can do pretty much on one's own. A real spiritual life and true spirituality have been replaced by and confused with religiosity. In many ways, salvation is understood as making a bad person good, or even making a good person better. But this falls short of the biblical account of salvation, in which a dead person is made alive. If a person is truly converted and not informed of the Holy Spirit and not encouraged/disciplined to keep in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:25), both in conversion and in living the Christian life, that individual will, by default, attempt to live the Christian life on his own in the flesh (Gal 3:3). This is precisely what we hear in many testimonies—rather than hearing a clear message of "but God," we hear a

great deal of “but I.” For those who are truly converted, they need to be disciplined in biblical truth which entails that they can and must grow and mature in their understanding (2 Cor 3:18; 2 Pet 3:18).

In closing, here are four implications and applications for us as we consider Trinitarian evangelism: (1) It is clearly taught in the Bible (Matt 28:18-20; Titus 3:4-7; 1 Pet 1:1-2), so if we are going to be faithful to the Bible, we must teach, preach, and live it. Commit yourself to learn, study, and grow in this important truth. Remember most of all that this is about knowing and loving God in all His fullness with heart, soul, strength, and mind (Luke 10:27). This is vitally important to remember in our postmodern day that is marked by relativism and pluralism. God has spoken, and His Word is authoritative and sufficient. It is also a helpful reminder to Christians who have tended to overlook the full, Trinitarian gospel for the sake of simplicity and brevity. (2) God’s glory is at stake. Each person of the Godhead—God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit—has a role in securing and applying salvation. If a chief mark of sin is falling short of God’s glory, the chief mark of salvation is glorifying God in all His fullness in all of life. (3) Our salvation is dependent upon this Trinitarian truth. This truth is the basis of our experience in the Christian life from beginning to end (Matt 28:18-20), including both evangelism (new birth) and discipleship (the Christian life). This reminds us of our absolute dependency on God, and this fosters deep humility in our lives (Isa 66:2; John 15:5; Heb 11:6). (4) When you disciple new believers, help them to interpret biblically what they have experienced spiritually. Although their experience is real and they have truly

been regenerated, their interpretation may not be accurate. These testimonies when shared publicly will then be clear presentations of the “but God” truth of the gospel.